

You can pick from any of the following topics. I'll provide links to relevant material soon after the semester starts.

1 – The 84th meeting of the Texas Legislature is underway. For 140 days members of the legislature will consider legislation affecting any number of issues in the state. I want you to pick one of the proposed bills – I'll highlight a few soon – and research it. Describe the problem it intends to address and the interests that stand to benefit if the bill passes. This class will finish before the session is over, so I want you to predict whether the bill is likely to pass.

2 – Despite the fact that the Texas economy has diversified over the past few decades, the energy industry is dominant in the state – the oil and gas industry especially. This can be beneficial when that sector is booming – which it has been recently – but not so much when it is shrinking – which has been the case since last summer. The price of a barrel of oil has shrunk by over a half. This can create problems for the state since a large chunk of tax revenue comes from the sale of oil and gas products. If the price decreases, tax revenue decreases, and since the state of Texas can only spend what it earns in revenue – this can create problems for the state budget and what programs can and cannot be provided for citizens of the state. I want you to research this question and address what implications the decrease in the price of oil might have for the state budget.

3 – Every two years the state of Texas goes through a process where it reviews the performance of state agencies. This is called sunset review. Every agency in the state – on a rotating basis – has to submit itself to a review that determines whether it is adequately performing the job it is required to do. This provides a good opportunity to dig into the nature of the bureaucratic system in the state, so I want you to review through the relevant material, pick one of the agencies being reviewed and come to your own conclusion about whether it is performing the job it was intended to perform.

4 – One of the major items on the legislature's agenda is criminal justice – specifically whether the state of Texas' tendency to inflict harsh penalties on non-violent offenses is cost effective. There are proposals in the works to lessen punishments for possession of small amounts of marijuana, as well as others. The costs of imprisonment, and the difficulties of convicted felons to find job opportunities after doing time, has led the business community especially to wonder if there are more efficient ways to deal with these problems – should they even be crimes at all?. But there are other forces that want to continue the status quo. I want you to investigate this issue and detail the arguments and actions on either side. What are the prospects for criminal justice reform – specifically the lowering of criminal penalties for non-violent drug crimes – the 84th legislative session?

5 – A city's charter is its constitution. It contains the basic design of the governing institutions and details the powers of the city. They tend to be reviewed from time to time and Houston is in the early stages of changing its charter. This gives us an opportunity to consider what design features best suit the governance of a large city like Houston. Research the proposals made so far on this matter and weigh on what changes may or may not be appropriate for the city and what changes you think might be made to Houston's charter.

Do you have a better idea? Write it up and send it to me when I want you to send me your proposal. You don't have to limit yourself to one of these four. You can use them if you want.

What I need from you:

- A paper that is at least 1000 word long, you may go over if you wish.
- A clearly defined thesis – a sentence stating what you are writing about and how you intend to address the topic.
- Legibility, correct spelling, good grammar.
- At least three references. I don't want you to use the links above as references, but they can give you an idea about where you can get the info you need.
- It also helps if the paper is pleasant to read. Good writing is a skill you should consider acquiring.

Look on Blackboard for the due date.